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ABSTRACT

Children in school cooperate in the evaluation of their products and activities by teachers and other students by calling attention to these products and activities with various language strategies. The requests that someone notice something and/or praise it are the data base for this study. The unmarked speech act for this request type is in the form of a yes/no or WH question that directly probes the hearer's opinion (e.g., "How do you like my sailboat?" "Do you like my batik?"). Video-taped samples of direct and indirect speech acts by children in nursery school and grades K-3 develop lines of research found in Sadock (1974) and Sinclair and Coulthard (1975). The occurrence at all grade levels of direct imperatives (as numerous as the unmarked response), other interrogative forms, and declaratives provides evidence: (1) for children's understanding and competence in the use of indirect forms (Shatz 1974; Garvey 1975), and (2) that the apparent "mismatch" between the grammatical surface form of an utterance and its function in discourse can be accounted for by information concerning school setting, the social conventions, and the relationship between participants. Evidence is also provided for developmental stages in the acquisition of understanding of and competence in use of indirect forms. (Author)

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Children's Comprehension and Use of Indirect Speech Acts: The Case of Soliciting Praise.

Paper presented at the Winter Meeting of the Linguistic Society of America, Chicago, Dec. 30, 1977

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The mismatch in indirect speech acts between surface grammatical structure and the function that the utterance is put to in discourse is a problem that has been repeatedly dealt with by linguists. In developing a set of conversational postulates, for example, Gordon and Lakoff (1971) sought to provide a way in which entailed forces could be derived from meaning. A basic principle advanced to explain utterances such as: (1) I want you to water the plants while I'm gone.

as opposed to a possible:

(2) Could you water the plants while I'm gone?

was that one could convey a request by (a) asserting a speaker-based sincerity condition or (b) by questioning a hearer-based condition (in this case, that the hearer would be willing to or capable of watering the plants).Sadock(1974) has also dealt with the problems of explaining indirect speech acts, and his higher performative solution to the problem of defining the illocutionary force of a given utterance is well-known. Davison (1975) argues that indirect speech acts resemble the corresponding direct speech act with the same illocutionary force rather than the speech act corresponding to the surface structure taken in its literal meaning. She claims that indirect statements and questions are normally used in situations where some conflict exists between the speaker's intention to say something and the anticipated reaction of the hearer, and that the linguistic form of the indirect speech act serves as a signal of the intrusion of a disturbing topic and as an acknowledgement of that fact. She confirms intuitions that the nature of some indirect speech acts is idiomatic, in that they often express nothing more than conventional politeness,"which requires the speaker to act as if his speech act is some sort of intrusion, though actually it would be nothing of the sort." (1975, p.181)

Children's ability to comprehend and use indirect speech acts has also been explored. In work on the use of directives, Ervin-Tripp(1971) gives evidence of children respon-

ding to age, dominance, the task at hand, and familiarity between participants, as factors affecting the form of a given request, with directives ranging from condition statements and imbedded imperatives, to direct imperatives. In a speech act approach to children's ability to convey and respond to requests for action, Garvey(1974) distinguishes between direct, indirect, and inferred requests on the basis of how the proposition Hearer(H) will do Action(A) is dealt with: that is. whether it is directly expressed, referenced in terms of one of the sincerity conditions for requests, referenced in terms of participant status or some relevant property of the act such as its necessity, or whether it is not referenced at all. She also provides evidence for children's competence in the use of indirect forms, and states that " direct and indirect requests and their responses provide support for the hypothesis that children are aware of interpersonal meanings on which the Request speech act is based."(p.61) Finally, Sinclair and Coulthard(1975) have addressed the issue of indirect speech acts as they occur in the school setting. To account for the lack of fit between grammar and discourse, they suggest situation and tactics, the former including all relevant factors in the environment, the social conventions and the shared experience of participants, the latter involving the syntagmatic patterns of discourse(that is, the way in which items precede, follow, and are related to each other.)

The present paper is concerned with the use and nature of indirect forms in the school setting, and specifically in the situation of soliciting praise both from teachers and peers. The data are part of a larger corpus resulting from research carried out by the Center for Applied Linguistics in an Independent School in Washington, D.C., and funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York. During a 15-minute video-taped interview, 8 children for each of 5 grade levels (nursery, and K-3) were asked about, among other things, projects that they had enjoyed working on or that they felt had been particularly successful. The interviewer then asked the child what he or she would say or do to elicit praise from a peer of higher status and from a teacher.(Montes,

forthcoming; Montes, Wolfram, and Griffin,1975) The resultant corpus of 80 utterances was analyzed in terms of five utterance types: direct questions, indirect questions, imperatives, declaratives, and combinations. Table 1 on the handout provides the numerical breakdown of the corpus.

The term direct is being used in this context to describe both yes/no and information questions that directly probe the hearer's opinion of the project in question. (Number 2 on the handout provides examples.) Yes/no questions outnumber wh-questions 15 to 4, and both kinds can be further subcategorized into questions having reference to the hearer containing the verb like, and negative question. With few exceptions, these direct questions are characterized by (1) a noun referring to the project in question, and (2) an accompanying possessive adjective. Eleven of the nineteen examples incorporate the name of the addressee, and the negative questions all incorporate an adjective modifying the project in question.

Indirect questions, imperatives, declaratives, and combinations are all being considered examples of indirect speech acts(#s 3,4,5, and 6 on the handout). Indirect questions most commonly involve the hearer's willingness to look at and/or display the the project in question, and again, shared features include the name of the addressee, and the project name. With one exception, descriptive adjectives are absent, perhaps conspicuously. The most interesting subset in the corpus is that of the imperative forms. They include, without exception, the verb look. The project name or a pronoun referring to it occurs in all but one example, and 11 of the 18 examples include the addressee's name. The corpus includes seven examples of declaratives whose only unifying characteristic is the mention of the project. Four are essentially descriptions of the project in question, while three are embedded imperatives. The label "combination" refers to utterances which include the addressee's name, and an imperative with look followed by a question or declarative concerning the project.

Further examination of the responses reveals some interesting patterns. In the

first place, the proportion of indirect to direct responses should be noted: when taken together, indirect questions, imperatives, declaratives, and combinations yield a total of 48 elicitations (for both peers and teachers), while directs have 19. Direct solicitations to peers number 13, while direct ones to teachers number 6. And while indirect solicitations to peers number 22, indirect ones to teachers number 26. In terms of specific utterance type, there is a decline in the use of indirect forms when the addressee is a teacher.(see #7 on handout). In moving from peer addressee to teacher addressee, we find switches from direct to indirect, and utterances that have direct forms for both peer and teacher, or indirect forms for peer and teacher. There is never a case, however, where an indirect form is used with a peer, and a direct form is used with the teacher. In fact, in a subset of the responses of 25 of the 40 children, totals for solicitations addressed to teachers were 17 indirect forms as opposed to 5 direct ones, while solicitation addressed to peers were balanced between 12 indirect forms and 13 direct ones. The usage of indirect questions is at its highest at the nursery level, and steadily declines as age increases. The use of direct questions steadily increases until the first grade, and then rapidly declines. As mentioned earlier, the yes/no questions far outnumber wh-questions, and again, their highest number is reached in first grade. It is interesting to note that while the imperative forms decline with increasing age, they are almost as numerous as direct questions, a fact that will be considered shortly. Combination utterances occur almost exclusively in the second and third grades, and turn out to be utterances that combine direct and indirect forms. Declaratives are practically non-existent when the addressee is a peer, but do occur when the addressee is a teacher.

The shift from the use of direct forms with peers to the use of indirect forms with teachers reveals an awareness on the part of the children to the difference in the social situation, be it conditioned by factors of age, authority, or status. Some-

what contradictory to this pattern is the preponderance of yes/no questions, which intuitively seem to leave much less room open for a negative answer. A decline with age in the use of direct forms has been pointed out, however, along with an increase in combination forms. These facts seem to point to two basic trends:

(1) as the child gets older, he or she becomes increasingly aware of the peculiar nature of the praise-soliciting situation, and becomes more reluctant to directly ask for evaluation. This is graphically demonstrated with the combination forms used by the older children, which appear to be almost a testing of what is appropriate. By the nature of the praise-soliciting situation, I am referring, for example, to an awareness that it is not generally considered favourable to talk about one's accomplishments at length without having been asked. In fact, ethnographic reports from the project revealed negative values about bragging being overtly expressed by second and third graders. The combination forms also reveal a scale within themselves from the more direct imperative look to a less direct declarative or question. Evidence for this first trend is also seen in the predominance of indirect forms with individuals of higher status such as teachers, and in the decline of the occurrence of yes/no questions such as "Do you like my batik?" with age. This trend and the role of indirect forms in the praise-soliciting situation can be related to Davison's description of the function of indirect speech acts: " In making a statement or asking a question, and often when making a request or offer, the speaker introduces a topic that the speaker thinks the hearer will find painful or disturbing, and that the speaker does not feel really entitled to talk about."(1975, p.153) It is clear that soliciting praise is neither painful nor disturbing, but it may well be something that a speaker is reluctant to initiate, and this reluctance reveals itself in the linguistic forms.

(2) the nature of the second trend is almost contradictory to that of the first. It concerns the nature of the school situation, and the central role of evaluation and praise in that situation. Few would quarrel with the idea that evaluation is indeed

a pivotal activity, and some might even agree that one aspect of a child's competence in the school situation has to do with the ability to obtain evaluation and/or praise. The trend revealed by the present data is that since evaluation and the soliciting of praise is such an integral part of the school experience, the linguistic forms for accomplishing it have become conventional and almost formulaic.(Griffin,1977) Direct questions such as Do you like... (or How do you like...) occur frequently in the corpus, but imperatives such as Look at (project name) occur just as frequently. This is evidence for the fact that soliciting praise is viewed as a situation requiring indirect forms, and that the most direct of the indirect forms has become formulaic in the school situation. In other words, since all involved recognize that a central part of the business of schooling is to get evaluated, getting an individual to look at a project suffices as a solicitation of praise. Two final examples clearly illustrate this point. The first , from the naturalistic part of the project corpus, involved an exchange between two children working together:

A: Look at my pretty house.

B:(while physically looking at the drawing) No. Look at mine.

The second concerns a child's answer to the question "what are you going to say or do to get the teacher to notice how good (your part of the mural) was":'Look, Miss B. at my part that I did', and she would probably say 'That's nice' even if it was ugly."

Children's Use and Comprehension of Indirect Speech Acts: The Case of Soliciting Praise

Ceil Kovac LSA Winter Meeting Chicago, Dec. 30,1977

1.

		N	K	1	2	3	Total	
Direct								
Direct Qus	VI	2	1	4	3	3	13	19
	VI'	0	2	3	0	1	6	
Indirect								
Indir.Qus.	VI	0	2	1	1	0	4	10
	VI'	3	2	0	0	1	6	
Imperatives	VI	3	3	2	1	1	10	18
	VI'	2	2	2	1	1	8	
Declaratives	VI	1	0	0	0	1	2	7
	VI'	2	0	2	1	0	5	
Combination	VI	0	0	1	3	2	6	13
	VI'	0	0	0	3	4	7	

2. (a) Larry, do you like my spaceship?

Isn't my batik pretty?

(b) How do you like my boat?

3. David, would you take a minute off so I can show you my Easter basket?

4. Tom, look at my painting.

5. I got a sword.

I made a God's eye at workshop.

6. Nancy, look at my mouse. Isn't it neat?

7.

	dir.	indir.
VI	13	12
VI'	5	17

(3 not usable)

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